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THE ROUND TABLE

THE MOST VALUABLE PHASE OF MY HIGH-SCHOOL TRAINING IN ENGLISH: A SYMPOSIUM

This symposium on "The Most Valuable Phase of My High-School Training in English" consists of contributions from about twenty graduates of the Yeatman High School, St. Louis, who are now pursuing various lines of work in college and in business. A recognition of the practical value of effective composition and of knowledge of general literature is shown in the first group of replies. More striking, however, is the emphasis laid on two other points: first, that the four years' training in outlining (analytic and synthetic), pursued in the study of literature, of the history of literature, and of composition, had done more to establish the right habits of thinking than any other work done in high school; second, that the dramatic presentation of scenes and of whole plays on the school stage not only had aided in an appreciation of dramatic values, but also had fostered the self-confidence and directness of address necessary in business success.

The first quotation is from the letter of a young business man and the second, from a college student taking a regular academic course:

"My four years' work in English in the high school has been of most practical value to me. I believe I have profited most from the rhetoric and composition as applied to handling business correspondence. In my work as secretary to the vice-president of one of our large banks, I have been called upon to handle considerable dictation, and frequently compose letters myself, and I have found that a knowledge of English grammar and composition is not only desirable, but necessary. The training in the fundamental principles of rhetoric and composition enables one to express ideas briefly, clearly, and logically, and this is very essential in the business world."

"If I were to make any suggestion or criticism on the English course in high school, it would be that not enough stress is laid upon grammar, diction, and composition, that is, upon learning to write correct English. Half of the Freshman year in the English department of the university is spent in teaching the correct forms of speech, the proper use of words, and even paragraphing, that is, eradicating the idea that the latter is a happy device for pleasing the eye by relieving the monotony of the written page."

The following letter is from a student in the Engineering Department of Washington University:

When, as a Freshman in college, I was put through a course in English composition, I found it very advantageous, and, in fact, absolutely essential, to express myself as clearly and as fluently as it was within me to do. And at times when the clearness and fluency that were within me seemed very murky and halting to the professor, I was given to regret that any of my time in high school had been devoted to merely reading what others had written. I cherished and treasured whatever personal experience I had there received in the matter of composition, and was inclined to regard this phase of my previous training as alone being of real help in my difficulties. It seemed to me the only foundation I had upon which I could stand, so as to at least keep my nose above the flood of criticism that deluged most of my work, and thus survive for another endeavor.

Of course the extent of my indebtedness under such conditions to this feature of the high-school course is too obvious to be gainsaid. And it might be thought that I was right in wishing it had been emphasized more strongly, even at the expense, if necessary, of remaining unacquainted with a great deal of literature.

But I was wrong. If success had been attained with such difficulty, equipped as I was with examples of the best efforts in literature, . . . what sort of a pathetic career might I not have run without this equipment?

I should not expect to attain to any high efficiency in physical labor by depriving myself of food and air. Neither should anyone expect to realize in the fullest measure latent possibilities, as a writer, who does not draw upon, and assimilate, as far as possible, what has been done in his line before him.

As we do not despise bodily nourishment, because it cannot be followed in all the intricate processes by which it builds up the system, so we must not underestimate the mental stimulus received from books, simply because it is manifested by no specific reaction. It is in the system, and who can say they are not better for it? It subtly molds our thought and action, and consequently our expression; and in the atmosphere of its influence we live, and move, and have our literary being.

But, just as exercise is essential to the full development of a well-nourished muscle, so the writing of themes is necessary if we would realize the most good from the stimulus derived from books. Conversely, the greater the stimulus, the more we are able to profit by persistent, hard exercise in composition. And as he cannot appreciate labor who is not himself laborious, so nobody can so appreciate good literature as he who has tried his hand at making it and at least encountered, if not altogether overcome, the attendant difficulties.

Let him then who feels competent to the task, attempt to separate the most important from these two mutually dependent and interrelated phases of my high-school training.

A student in the School of Agriculture of the University of Missouri writes as follows, touching upon the study of literature as well as of composition:

To state just what phase of my high-school English has been most beneficial to me in my university work is rather difficult, but the training, as a whole, has certainly been a great help to me in all my activities, both in the classroom and elsewhere. As a preparation for college English, it has been most satisfactory.

Perhaps in my course, agriculture, the most tangible good has been my training in composition and rhetoric. A large part of my work consists in gathering facts from scattered sources, and incorporating these facts, arranged in their proper sequence, into a coherent whole. In this category will come not only the papers required in various courses, but contributions to the agricultural press, theses, bulletins, and other things which the modern tiller of the soil is called upon to write. Certainly, it is fortunate that composition and rhetoric were a prominent part of my English in high school.

The value of the cultural phases of the work is less tangible, but I feel that I could not have dispensed with any of it. If I had not learned to appreciate good literature, I would hesitate to enter a profession in which I might have to depend upon my library, to a large extent, for my companionship. As it is, I look forward with great pleasure to the time when I shall have leisure to enjoy good books.

I suppose I hardly need to mention how indispensable cultural training is to the enjoyment of the society of a college community, nor need I mention the amount of self-satisfaction there is in it—you know about that better than I do.

Other graduates have written at considerable length on the forming of habits of reading. The next quotation is from the letter of a young man employed in one of the big banks of St. Louis:

The first thought that comes to my mind, as I read over the above question, is Shakespeare. I don't think that I shall ever tire of reading or seeing a production of *Julius Caesar* or *Macbeth*. These two works have always appealed to me especially, and that may to some extent account for my loss of interest in some of the other English works. Last year, before witnessing a Sothorn and Marlowe production of *Macbeth*, I made a very careful study of the book and I can truthfully say that I never enjoyed a play more. I shall remember *Silas Marner*, *Ivanhoe*, and Burke's *Conciliation* speech, but I must give Shakespeare the preference.

This is from a tutor in Harvard University, whose advanced studies have been almost wholly along mathematical lines:

Of the entire time that I took English, my work during the Senior year stands out most prominent. I have always felt that the survey of English

literature, with special emphasis on the works of Milton and Shakespeare, did more to broaden me in a literary way than any amount of reading that I could have done myself. The relations of the different periods, the political and social movements which were going on at those times, the study of all these in connection with the masterpieces, served to prepare me for the more satisfactory appreciation and understanding of good literature.

The two letters following are from university girls, one preparing to teach domestic science work and the other to teach German:

"As to the outside reading—I shall be grateful to the English instructors all my days for instilling in me the keen desire to read. Before I entered Yeatman, I read probably one or two books of fiction in a year. Suddenly I grew so fond of reading that I was averaging about five books per week. The immediate result may not have been very fortunate, but the forming of the habit of reading, or rather of the desire for reading, has been of the greatest help to me in research work. I always have a desire now to find out as much about a subject as I possibly can.

"In connection with my school work and also as regards my general reading, I have greatly appreciated the historical survey of English literature which we took in the Senior year. Not only has it given me a general grasp of the entire subject, but it has formed a basis for reading to replace an aimless method of reading at random, from the handiest author."

"Considering entire courses with regard to their value, I think that of my Senior year, a course in the history of English literature, has been the most directly beneficial. Since my studies at college have been largely literary, this general knowledge of the development of English literature has been of use throughout, in German and French, as well as in English classes.

"In the latter, it furnished the background for the more intensive study of certain men and periods; when I took a similar course at college, I had the most important facts and the general relations already in mind and could give more attention to new phases of the study. In studying foreign literature, a knowledge of the English helped me to understand developments, international influence, and often furnished comparisons and analogies that proved very helpful.

"One of the greatest values of such a course is the incentive it gives to further independent reading. It is, by its very nature, a mere sketch or outline, to be filled in by as much reading as possible, and in most cases the members of the class were interested enough to do some reading of their own accord. The course itself thus became a guide to direct our further reading.

"Throughout the four years at high school the supplementary reading was perhaps the most interesting part of the work; and the time of which this was particularly true was the term in which we studied *Ivanhoe*, and read more of Scott and *Harold* and *Hereward* outside of class. These novels made the story

of *Ivanhoe* more interesting, because, though several centuries apart, they all treat of the struggle of the Normans and Saxons. *Harold* especially has given me a particular interest in the period of the Norman conquest. These 'outside readings' also tended to develop careful habits of reading, because reports on them were usually required, and my former method of fast reading was not of much avail. Then, too, this kind of work gave an opportunity for a much broader knowledge of books than would have been possible with mere class work. If I were to suggest anything for a high-school course, it would be to have as much reading as possible—even more than I had throughout my four years."

Work in topical outlining has always been one of the most important phases of the English course at Yeatman. The next excerpt comes from a teacher in Cleveland and the second and third from students in the University of Missouri and in Washington University:

"The outlining has helped me, more than anything else, to think clearly. I always feel that unless I can outline my thought on a certain subject, my knowledge of that subject is vague. In presenting a lesson to a class I must have the outline of that lesson clearly in mind, otherwise I do not expect to convey my thought to the minds of the children."

"Much more important to me, though, has proved the system of outlining certain pieces of literature, which, while I considered it the bugbear of my high-school English work, has made almost all studying I have done since then much easier. It trains one in rapid thought-getting and shows the author's purpose and to a great extent the construction of his work. I am sure that it did more than any other one thing toward making the usual formidable 'Freshman English' comparatively easy for me."

"And one of the things that has helped me most is the system of outlining which I learned when a Freshman. Making an outline has often straightened out a confused mass of material, by giving the proper relations of co-ordination and subordination. By showing the relation of parts to the whole, it helped me in understanding paragraph and sentence structure; it has been, I think, a great aid to logical thinking along any line."

The following is from the secretary of a large fruit and produce exchange:

I am sure that the method of "dissecting" a book which we followed, the grouping of ideas under the proper heads and subheads, has exerted a large influence in making me more methodical in my methods of thought. Very frequently, when I have become entangled in the mazes of an involved "story," or advertisement, I have recourse to the scheme we used in our "outlines" of books we had read to put my thoughts in order, and extricate myself.

The letter that follows was written by a Senior in the University of Wisconsin, who is now doing successful newspaper work in Wichita, Kan.:

Aside from the ordinary and conventional grounding in the composition and literature of the English language, there is something for which I have always felt indebted to my four years of preparatory English in Yeatman High School. It is something which I have come to realize during three years of university work is not taught to and instilled into every high-school student. When I started my English preparation at Yeatman with Irving's *Sketch Book* and a rhetoric, I was taught a system of outlining for any and every subject, whether that subject was something on which I was required to write a theme, a poem I was reading, a speech or a book I was studying. When I studied the survey of English literature and Shakespeare in my fourth year, I was still required to think about and put my subject in outline form.

The system was something which I have never met since my high-school days, and which I cannot think is widely used. I often wonder why it should not be, because it seems to me to be the simplest as well as the most scientific and elastic of any of the methods of grouping and subordinating ideas. Coefficients were used to denote the value and place of the ideas and ordinary arabic numbers their sequence in the groups. I was forced to use the system day after day for exposition, narration, argumentation—in short, any and every kind of writing.

In four years of compulsory use it became part of my thinking and writing apparatus. I find myself almost unconsciously grouping ideas in outline form. In Freshman year I took notes in a history course and suddenly awoke to the fact that, while I was leaving out the figures and coefficients, I was mechanically outlining the lectures by making paragraphs and indenting subordinate ideas. When the professor held his first conference and looked over our notebooks to see if the Freshmen were approaching the subject in the right manner, he asked me where I had learned the trick and said my notes were refreshing after the jumbles of ideas he had been going over. I did not swell with false personal pride at the compliment. I laid the credit where it was due. It was one of the many times I have had occasion to mention my high school with pride.

Whatever I write now I always look ahead to plan and outline it in my mind if not on paper. The system even stuck by me last summer when I reported on a daily newspaper. I value now my preparatory training in thinking thoughts as much as or more than I do my training in writing them.

The three remaining contributions come from young business men, one engaged in newspaper work, one in banking, and one in the sales department of a large cereal company.

"I am also convinced that the play which we adapted and afterward presented taught me in a degree to appreciate dramatic values."

"In other business activities, I have found my study in public speaking and argumentation very useful. To face another man and convince him of the merits of your proposition is no easy task, and requires considerable study and training. The study of Burke's *Conciliation* and the debates, etc., incident thereto, as well as my training in the literary society, were very helpful in

preparing me for such work and, especially, in relieving the timidity with which I was possessed. I think that such training ought to be greatly encouraged."

"Personally, I feel that the practical application of Shakespearian work in the presenting of the plays was possibly of more benefit than any other one part of the course.

"To interpret one's part in presenting a play on our own auditorium stage required the close study of the character represented. Then in order to present successfully the play, it was necessary to possess considerable poise and self-confidence. Such training is excellent and in no other part of the English course did we really get this valuable training.

"The presentation of a Shakespearian drama also impressed me much more than even a close reading of the play. I felt interested in seeing how different pupils would interpret different parts and watched with interest any ideas different from my own of Shakespeare's characters.

"The dramatic work has been of much practical value to me. It enables the student to judge of a dramatic presentation he may attend. He can see in his own mind how he would interpret characters—possibly a little differently—he can see new meanings to certain lines and draw entirely new ideas from the play.

"The confidence and poise that one gains in dramatic work is of inestimable value in practical life. Personally, I have been called upon quite frequently to address an audience and I always felt that my platform work had enabled me to do so with some measure of success.

"On the whole, I can sincerely say that my four years' course in English has really been of more practical benefit to me in actual business life in the office and on the road than any other one study in my course."

CHARLES B. GODDARD

YEATMAN HIGH SCHOOL
ST. LOUIS, MO.

CLASSICAL PLAYS FOR HIGH SCHOOLS

Though we hear a good deal these days of dramatizing classics, or bits of classics, as exercises in composition, and of acting them out, and though high-school dramatics is a subject usually discussed wherever English teachers get together, the real importance of such work as a means of inculcating a love of good drama, of training in expression, and of awakening and developing individuality is not recognized today as it was three or four hundred years ago. At least as far back as the middle of the sixteenth century acting formed a part of the curriculum in the great English public schools, and its value as an educational